

**PRESS RELEASE**  
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## **Religious heritage strengthens rural communities**

More than one hundred delegates from over twenty different countries met to support religious heritage conservation in rural areas at the third biennial conference organised by Future for Religious Heritage (FRH) in Halle (Saale), Germany in October 2014, titled “Sustaining Europe’s Rural Religious heritage”.

The speakers gathered from 20 European countries and testified to the need for greater attention to religious heritage for the future sustainability of rural communities. Public support for this was also manifested in a European poll carried out by FRH and SocioVision in April 2014, which shows that 75% of Europeans support action to save these buildings.

Olivier de Rohan, President of FRH, said:

*“Europe should be proud of its religious heritage! There is a religious building in every village and town and the historic churches, synagogues, mosques or temples contain the history of local people, their ancestors and modern society. Our generation has a unique opportunity to save these great buildings and stories for future generations.”*

Many religious buildings were erected by communities for use by the community, and speakers demonstrated that they bring great opportunities for people to come together and build community. Both religious and secular civil society of the 21st century needs local hubs, beauty, and belonging. Examples of opportunities included:

- **boosting employment** in repair and adaptation and the running of buildings
- **developing professional skills** in protection of traditional buildings
- **growth of cultural tourism**: visitors to religious heritage are increasing every year
- **volunteering** and community capacity-building
- **boosting local economies** by providing venues for arts and cultural events
- **reducing carbon footprint and energy use** by using and reusing heritage buildings
- **promoting tolerance and understanding** by bringing together different parts of the community in a calm, reflective space that benefits the wellbeing of individuals and communities
- **promoting Europe’s shared cultural heritage** through its unique role in rural and urban spaces and communities

Buildings and interiors are at risk because of changing patterns of worship and other public participation, ever increasing secularisation of societies and reducing population in rural areas. Theft and vandalism remain a threat and sometimes increase when a building is underused or left empty. In some countries economic and social change are also leading to insensitive development which leads to loss of historic religious buildings.

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### **NOTE TO EDITORS**

**Future for Religious Heritage (FRH)** is the European network for historic places of worship. FRH is a non-religious organisation open to all, with members in over 30 countries.

It is the only network of charities, governmental, religious and university departments that work to protect religious heritage buildings and interiors across Europe. Initiated as a grass-roots movement, it has been set up to act as a catalyst for change in the sector, to help those active in the management of Europe’s sacred heritage and to provide them with some of the tools to facilitate their task.

The aims of the association are to promote, encourage and support the safeguard, maintenance, conservation, restoration, accessibility and the embellishment of places of worship, their contents and their history.

“**Sustaining Europe’s Rural Religious Heritage**” was FRHs fourth international conference since its inauguration in 2010. These events bring together professionals in the field sharing ideas and exchanging

experiences.

**“Secular Europe backs Religious Heritage”** is a poll run in April 2014 by the network Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), conducted by Sociovision and Toluna. It shows that Europeans of all generations have a strong attachment to their religious buildings and want to safeguard them for the future. 6,000 Europeans from France, Germany, UK, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden took part in the survey.

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## INTERVIEWS AVAILABLE

**Olivier de Rohan-Chabot**, President of FRH and of the Sauvegarde de l’Art Française  
**Lilian Grootswagers**, Secretary of FRH, Vice-President of the Task Force Toekomst Kerkgebouwen  
**Crispin Truman**, Council Member of FRH, CEO of the Churches Conservation Trust, UK

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